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Aids to Bible Readers.¹

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS.

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The beginnings of Christianity in Rome—The Gentile character of the Christian community—Gentile type of the Christianity—The Apostle's reasons for writing: The Roman Christians were in his territory by virtue of being Gentiles; his work in the East was finished; he could not go to Rome at once; there was danger of the Judaizers coming to Rome—Purpose of the ethical part; of the whole—Analysis.

THE letter of the apostle Paul to the Romans differs from all his earlier extant letters in that it is written to the Christians of a city which up to the time of the writing of the letter he had never visited. To whose labor or to what causes the beginnings of Christianity in Rome were due, it is impossible to say with certainty. Residents of Rome, Jews or Jewish proselytes, visiting Jerusalem and hearing the gospel preached there; travelers hearing of the new religion in the lands about the Ægean Sea, where Paul and his companions had preached it; preachers of the gospel who went to Rome for the very purpose of carrying the gospel to the capital city—all these may have had that part in bringing it about before the apostle of the Gentiles found himself free to visit the great Gentile capital there was already there a band of believers whose faith was spoken of far and wide (Rom. 1: 8-13). But it is a noticeable fact that the apostle makes no reference to any previous connection, direct or indirect, between himself and the church as such. Probably neither he nor any one closely associated with him had taken any leading part in the founding of the church. Equally noticeable is the absence of any reference to any other person as the founder of the church. The view that it was planted by Peter finds no hint of support in the letter—indeed seems plainly excluded by the apostle's conduct and his principle of not building on another man's foundation, which he announces in this very letter—15: 20. The view most consistent with the internal evidence is that the church was in a peculiar sense an independent body, owing its existence to various

influences rather than to the labors of a single apostle or missionary. Indeed it seems probable that the Christians in Rome constituted several groups or communities rather than one organized body. The letter is addressed to all Christians in Rome (1:7), but the word *church* occurs only in the 16th chapter, and then refers, as concerns Rome, to a local group of Christians rather than to the whole body of Christians in the city.

Concerning the character of the community the letter affords us somewhat more definite information. The Christians in Rome were evidently in large part of Gentile blood. While addressing himself to all Christians in the city the apostle definitely speaks of them as Gentiles (1:5, 6, 13). That there were also Jews or Jewish proselytes among the Roman Christians is indeed probable. Setting aside 2:17, which is merely an apostrophe, and 7:1, which rightly translated contains no reference to the Jewish law in particular, and 4:1, in which the apostle perhaps merely speaks from his own point of view, it still remains that Paul assumes in his arguments and references an acquaintance with the Old Testament on the part of his readers not likely to have existed if the church were simply and purely Gentile (the similar element in Galatians is to be explained from the Jewish influences to which the Galatians had been subjected), and especially that the scruples about food and days spoken of in chaps. 14, 15, are much more likely to have existed among Jews than among Gentiles. Yet the paucity of this evidence and the definiteness of the expressions referring to the persons addressed as Gentiles, leaves no room for doubt that these latter constituted the prevailing element of the Christian community. It was moreover as Gentiles that they became Christians. There is nothing in the letter to indicate that they had as yet come under such a judaizing influence as that, for example, to which the Galatian churches had been subjected. All that the apostle says concerning what they had been taught is in approval (1:8; 6:17; 15:14). This is not indeed enough to show that he was entirely satisfied with them. Yet when taken with the silence of the letter concerning any serious errors prevalent among them, and with what we know of the apostle's view of the judaizing heresy as being for Gentiles an utter perversion of the gospel (Gal. 1:7; 5:2 ff.); it goes far toward proving that the Christians in Rome already held a type of Christianity not widely different from that which Paul preached; it makes it quite certain that they had not accepted circumcision and the ordinances of the Jewish law as the foundation stone of their Christianity. This existence in Rome

of a Christian community, not only predominantly made up of Gentiles, but holding a non-Jewish type of Christianity, yet not established by Paul, is itself an interesting fact and one which throws light upon the progress of Christianity in the apostolic age.

There is at first sight something rather perplexing in the evidence concerning Paul's relations to the Romans, and his reasons for wishing to visit them. On the one side it is evident that he regarded the Roman Christians as within the scope of his apostleship just because they were Gentiles (Rom. 1:5, 6, 13; 15:14-16). On the other side he declares that he has made it his aim so to preach the gospel not where Christ was already named, that he might not build upon another man's foundation, and that this has prevented his coming to Rome hitherto (15:20-22). There is an apparent inconsistency between this principle and his then present intention to go to Rome, which he has already announced and which only a few lines later he announces again. But this appearance of inconsistency is turned into a means of gaining a more exact knowledge of the apostle's principles and methods when we observe that in writing Rom. 15:20 Paul really has before his mind two closely related, yet distinguishable, principles respecting his choice of places of labor. The one pertains to the condition of the place in itself considered, the other to the relation to other Christian workers into which labor in a given place will bring him. The latter of these two principles is expressed in the words "that I might not build on another man's foundation." Its precise significance is made clearer by the comparison of 2 Cor. 10:13 ff. At Corinth other men had encroached on Paul's field of labor, seeking to pervert his followers, and thus to find occasion of glorying in things made ready to their hand by him. Of such conduct Paul declares himself not guilty. He would not encroach on another man's territory, or, as he says in Romans, he would not build on another man's foundation. Yet this principle does not exclude him from Rome. The avowal of the principle is followed immediately by the announcement of his intention to come to Rome. Moreover, he had long wished to come to Rome, and had been hindered not by anything in the history or constitution of the Christian community there, but by a temporary obstacle now removed (1:13), viz., the pressure of work further east (15:20-23). Indeed, he evidently feels it necessary to explain why he had not come before rather than why he comes at all. It is evident, therefore, both that Rome is not in the territory of another and that his principle respecting his fellow-workers, was not that he would not

take up the work another had laid down, or carry forward what he had not himself begun, but that he would not encroach on a territory that belonged to another, would not seek to proselyte a church founded on different lines from those which he approved. His principle of choice of fields, so far as it pertained to the condition of the field, is expressed in the words, "making it my aim so to preach the gospel not where Christ was already named." Obedience to this principle had kept him in the East till he had fully preached the gospel from Jerusalem round about unto Illyricum; and even now that his work in the East is finished, he can gratify his long-cherished desire to visit Rome only on his way to unevangelized Spain (15 : 24). Yet the fact that he writes to the Romans and that he plans to visit them even on the way, shows that his principle was not that he should never do any work in a field where Christ was already known, but that he should not allow such work to interfere with his own special task of *planting* Christianity in new fields. Combined into one the two principles become a determination to give the preference to unevangelized fields and never to labor in places where Christ has already been preached, either when this would be encroaching on another man's territory or when it would interfere with his own proper pioneer work. The former condition had apparently never existed in the case of Rome. We have at least no intimation in the letter or elsewhere of its existence. We are led to believe that though the field was not Paul's by right of having planted the seed there, yet it was his by virtue of its Gentile character, and belonged to no one else by any conflicting claim. The second obstacle had till now hindered him from going to Rome, but was now removed by the completion of his work in the East, and the fact that Rome could be visited on the way to Spain.

But why then does not the apostle start at once for Rome? Why did he write this letter instead of going? He had reached a turning point in his work as a Christian missionary. From Jerusalem round about even unto Illyricum he had fully preached the gospel, so that he had no longer any place in these regions (Rom. 15 : 19-23). The missionary journeys in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, of which we read in the letters to the Thessalonians, Galatians, and Corinthians, were all past, and by them he had lighted the light of the gospel in the centers of influence throughout the Greek world. His face is toward the West as never before. But one thing hinders him. He has an errand to accomplish in Jerusalem. It is a matter of great consequence. Eager as he is to reach Rome, eager as he is to preach the

gospel to regions beyond, the long journey to Jerusalem must first be made in order to carry to the poor among the saints there the offering of the Gentile Christians in Galatia, Macedonia and Achaia, and thus to bind together by bonds of love and gratitude the two great divisions of the church and to avert a schism of the body of Christ. How long time this journey would occupy it was of course impossible to foresee. Meantime he knows only too well that the same party whose influence he has reason to fear at Jerusalem, and who have for several years been moving westward along the line of the Gentile churches, is not likely to be inactive. The judaizers who have so nearly succeeded in corrupting the churches of the Galatians, and who have so bitterly opposed him at Corinth have not yet given up the fight. They do not seem to have reached Rome; certainly they had made no marked impression there. But no one could tell how soon they might take ship for Italy. The time which Paul's journey to Jerusalem would necessarily occupy would give them time to anticipate him in Rome.

The occasion of the letter, then, seems to be furnished by the coincidence of these facts; the completion of the apostle's work in the East leading him to turn his face toward the West; the necessity of postponing his journey thither long enough to make a visit to Jerusalem; and the activity of the judaizers, involving the danger that before he should reach Rome they would be there perverting the Christians of the capital from the liberal type of Christianity, which up to this time they had held, to the narrow, judaistic view of the nature of the gospel's mission. That the letter to the Romans was written to prepare the Roman Christians against a possible attack of the judaizers, is indeed nowhere explicitly stated, but the epistle is certainly admirably adapted to this end, and no more probable view of its main purpose has ever been suggested.

This does not, however, quite account for the whole letter. The practical ethical portion of the letter (12:1—15:13) bears no special marks of being directed against judaistic errors. It deals in part with broad principles of Christian morality appropriate to any church; in part with the relations of Christians to the state, a matter of special importance to Christians in Rome; in part with the conscientious scruples, felt by some but not at all appreciated by others, concerning the eating of meat and the observance of certain days. Such differences of opinion on matters of conscience might easily become the occasion of dissension and division. Yet it does not appear that such division had actually occurred. In general purpose, therefore, this

portion of the letter is akin to the earlier chapters. It seeks to build up and fortify rather than to correct or to rebuke; only the dangers which it foresees are from within rather than from without, and are moral rather than doctrinal.

Taking the whole letter together it is evident that it was written when the apostle was looking forward to visiting Rome, yet was temporarily hindered from going at once, and that its purpose was to set before the Roman Christians a clear exposition of the gospel of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles by faith apart from works of the law, and to enforce certain great principles of Christian morality, in order to protect them against the possible assault of judaizing error, and to build them up in Christian character particularly in the matters affecting their relation to the state and their internal harmony.

The course of thought is orderly and systematic, and in the main so clear as to leave but little room for difference of opinion concerning it.

ANALYSIS.

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| I. INTRODUCTION. | I : 1-17. |
| 1. Salutation, including description of the author's apostleship. | I : 1-7. |
| 2. Thanksgiving for the faith of the Christians in Rome, and expression of his deep interest in them. | I : 8-15. |
| 3. Theme of the Letter : The Gospel the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes, both Jew and Greek. | I : 16, 17. |
| II. DOCTRINAL PORTION OF THE LETTER : Defense and exposition of the theme. | I : 18-11 : 36. |
| A. Sin and guilt universal, and hence justification by works of law impossible. | I : 18-3 : 20. |
| 1. The guilt of the Gentiles. | I : 18-32. |
| 2. The guilt of the Jews. | 2 : 1-3 : 20. |
| B. But now a righteousness apart from works of law, available through faith, for both Jews and Gentiles, has been revealed; this righteousness described and explained. | 3 : 21-5 : 21. |
| 1. This righteousness comprehensively described. | 3 : 21-26. |
| 2. Bearing of this on Jewish pride and exclusiveness. | 3 : 27-30. |
| 3. Accordance of this teaching with law (<i>i. e.</i> , with the Old Testament conception of the nature and office of law) shown from the case of Abraham. | 2 : 31-4 : 25. |
| 4. Blessedness and excellence of this salvation. | ch. 5. |
| a) Blessed consequences of justification : peace ; joy | |

- in tribulation; hope of final salvation, fully assured since it rests on God's love manifested in our justification and proved by the death of Christ for us. 5 : 1-11.
- b) Excellence of this salvation shown by comparing and contrasting the sin and death that came through Adam with the righteousness unto life that came through Jesus Christ. 5 : 12-21.
- C. The changed relations of those that are justified, to sin, and law, and death. chaps. 6, 7, 8.
1. To sin. chap. 6,
 2. To law. chap. 7.
 3. To death. 8 : 1-30.
 4. Triumphant summing up of the blessedness of God's elect. 8 : 31-39.
- D. The rejection of Israel. chaps. 9, 10, 11.
1. The apostle's grief over the fact. 9 : 1-5.
 2. Yet God is justified therein. 9 : 6-33.
 - a) It violates no promise of God. 9 : 6-13.
 - b) It involves no intrinsic unrighteousness in God. 9 : 14-24.
 - c) It was foretold by the prophets. 9 : 25-29.
 - d) The failure of the Jews to attain righteousness is due to their own lack of faith. 9 : 30-33.
 3. The apostle's desire that they may be saved. 10 : 1
 4. The fault of the Jews shown more explicitly. 10 : 2-21.
 - a) Ignorance of the divine way of righteousness. 10 : 2-15.
 - b) Wilful resistance : they heard but obeyed not. 10 : 16-21.
 5. The nature of this rejection explained. 11 : 1-32.
 - a) Not of the nation *in toto* but consisting rather in the election of a part and the hardening of the rest. 11 : 1-10.
 - b) Not absolute and final. 11 : 11-32.
 - 6 Ascription of praise to God for his unsearchable wisdom. 11 : 33-36.
- III. HORTATORY PORTION OF THE EPISTLE. 12 : 1-15 : 13
1. The believer's offering of himself to God. 12 : 1, 2.
 2. His duty as a member of the body of Christ. 12 : 3-21.
 3. His duty as a subject of civil government. 13 : 1-7.
 4. His duty as a member of society. 13 : 8-10.
 5. Enforcement of all these exhortations by the nearness of "the day." 13 : 11-14.
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- IV. CONCLUSION : PERSONAL MATTERS, FINAL INJUNCTIONS, and doxology. 15 : 14-16 : 27.